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## Why are some students reluctant to use L2 in EFL speaking classes? An action research at tertiary level.

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### Abstract

The focus in ESL/EFL contexts had been on grammar translation for a long time until the modern communicative approaches claiming good communication skills stepped in. Nevertheless, one of the complaints that teachers nowadays make about English oral communication classes is that students are reluctant to speak English. While the students may participate in the class in other skills such as reading, writing and listening, they behave much more unwillingly when it comes to speaking in second language (L2). As Ali (2007) suggests "willing learners in an ESL setting who are unwilling to speak English within and beyond the boundaries of the classroom is not a trivial matter" as it is believed. The level of the students is not an affective factor and the problem exists among ESL/EFL learners from beginning to more advanced levels. Considering that students do not adopt active speech roles in EFL classrooms, an action research was conducted among 22 young adults studying at an English-medium university in a Turkish EFL setting. Data were gathered through likert scale questionnaires and one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that several factors such as anxiety, fear of being despised, teacher strategy, and culture were found to influence the reluctance problem among speakers. The present paper brings forth the reasons for reluctance in EFL oral communication classes, learners' perspective on this issue and provides solutions to the field of second language learning on how to make students willing to participate.

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### 1. Introduction

In the past, the focus in English as a second language (ESL) and English as foreign language (EFL) contexts used to be on methods such as grammar translation, audio-lingual and more of the same. This period lasted for a very long time and within this period different methods and techniques were in force. However; when we consider recent techniques, it could easily be seen that the focus has shifted from those methods to communicative methods. Currently, the key factor in the area of second language is being able to use it and to communicate through it.

The use of modern communicative language teaching approaches in the language classrooms and the widespread use of the English language have increased the demands to have good communication skills but the existence of some feelings in the learners may prevent them from achieving the desired goal (Tanveer, 2007). They take oral communication courses, and they are expected to perform well and develop their communication skills by means of these courses. However, it has been observed that in EFL classrooms, especially in speaking courses, students are reluctant to use the foreign language (hereafter referred to as L2) they have been learning. This has been a great

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challenge for EFL teachers for years and the teachers complain about their students' silence during oral communication courses, especially in a Turkish EFL setting. While the students may participate in the activities incorporating other skills such as reading, writing and listening, they are unwilling when it comes to speaking in L2. Students do not adopt active speech roles in the classroom and these unwilling students are generally resistant to participate in speaking activities where they should be more talkative in order to develop their communication and speaking skills. The proficiency level of the students is not an affective factor either and the problem exists among EFL learners from beginning to more advanced levels. There may be many factors preventing students from playing active roles in the classroom. The effect of reluctance has been the subject of a growing body of research which were mainly conducted among EFL contexts. For instance, in 1992 Gaudart claimed that some teachers attribute learners' passiveness in the classroom discussions to lack of motivation. Gaudart (1992) further related low participation to learners' inability to function in oral communication. In as much as the participants are living in a country where English is not an everyday language, they lack the practice for developing their communicative skills because the classroom is the only place where L2 students could practice the language they are learning; so, they need lots of practice. Liu and Littlewood (1997) found out that the more speaking activities in which students engaged, the higher they rate their ability to speak and vice versa, which indicates that students feel confident about their oral proficiency simply because they have had a lot of practice in speaking.

As suggested by Horwitz et al. (1986) and MacIntyre & Gardner (1989), when people speak in L2, they become more apprehensive and tense and thus more unwilling to participate in a conversation. From another perspective, culture could also affect students' speaking performances. As Li and Lui (2011) put forward, one of the causes of reticence and reluctance in the EFL classroom may be cultural differences because certain cultures forbid or strongly discourage individuals from speaking up in classroom settings. Sometimes there may be the reason of deference towards teachers and elder students' behavior. The best example for this would be Asian students learning English as an L2. There are considerable research conducted on the reticence of Asian learners and one of them was carried out by Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996). Based on six interviews of Japanese students at the University of Edinburgh, Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996) found out that the students were reticent in EFL classrooms due to fear of public failure, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, low English proficiency, inability to keep up with native speakers, incompetence in the rules and norms of English conversation, disorientation, etc. For example, Lee and Ng (2010) carried out a research and according to the results they found, teacher strategy is a major determinant of student reticence in classrooms. Pedagogical factors such as lesson objectives and task type were also found to have an influence on a teacher's classroom-based interaction strategy decision making. Similarly, Tsui (1996) found out that one of the commonly mentioned causes of reticence in the class is students' lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes and being laughed at.

To sum up, there is a body of evidence which paints EFL students' reluctance to speak in L2 within oral communication courses and this is one of the biggest problems widely encountered in EFL settings. There are considerable number of researches that have been conducted in order to surmount this reluctance problem among L2 students. In a study he conducted with 567 Hong Kong students, Littlewood (2004) discovered that there are 6 factors that hinder participation in the classroom. The results show that these are 1) tiredness, 2) fear of being wrong, 3) insufficient interest in the class, 4) insufficient knowledge in the subject, 5) shyness and 6) insufficient time to formulate ideas. The present study, similarly, seeks the reasons of keeping silent in English oral communication classes. The purpose of this study is to discover the reasons of ESL students' reluctance during oral performances, to shed light on the roots of these reasons and propose some strategies that can help teachers overcome the issue of acting reluctant in oral communication courses. The research questions are as follows:

1. Why are some students reluctant to use L2 in EFL oral communication classes?
2. What are the perceptions of students about speaking in L2?

## 2. Methods

The purpose of this study is to bring forth the reasons of reluctance in EFL oral communication classes and learners' perspectives on this issue. With this specific aim, the researcher tries to find out the reasons of reluctance observed among the students who are attending English oral communication courses in a Turkish EFL setting.

### *2.1. Participants*

The study was conducted among 22 young adults aged between 18 and 25 (Mean: 20,5). 17 of them were female while 5 of them were male. The participants' native language is Turkish and they are advanced-level English students. Furthermore, they are freshmen at the School of Education, English Language Teaching Department where the medium of language is English.

### *2.2. Materials*

An informal likert-scale questionnaire was created in light of the in-class observation made by the researcher who is also the instructor of the oral communication course. A 15-item informal likert scale was created by the researcher. The data was elicited through five options which ranged from 1 "Strongly disagree" to 5 "Strongly agree". The participants were instructed to choose one of the choices reflecting their thoughts. The researcher then evaluated the results through using SPSS. In addition to the likert scale, to achieve reliable outcomes from the research and to find out the other possibilities affecting the participants' desire to speak in English, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 of the participants.

### *2.3. Data collection procedures*

The data were collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods. In the first stage, the participants were given a 15-item likert-scale questionnaire. The items were introduced to the participants until they demonstrate an adequate understanding of the procedure and they were all tested individually. Following the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was applied. The participants were interviewed by the researcher face to face. The sessions were tape recorded and transcribed.

### *2.4. Analysis*

Text analysis of the interview and the frequency of items were examined to analyze the data.

## **3. Discussion**

Despite the fact that alpha coefficient for the 15 items is 0.76, they were not in concordance with the interview results. When the questionnaire results were analyzed, expected range of reluctance among students was not found. Nevertheless, when the participants were interviewed their answers were not consistent with the questionnaire results. Therefore, the questionnaire results were ruled out since the researcher thought that the data gathered through interview sessions is much more reliable. The participants' reluctance could even be understood from their behavior at the beginning of the interview sessions. 5 participants were included in the interview and every one of them asked the researcher whether the conversation would be carried out in English or in Turkish during the interview. Since the researcher believed that the participants could explain their feelings and thoughts in their mother tongue much better, she had decided to conduct the interview in the participants' mother tongue, which is Turkish. Interestingly, the moment the researcher told them that s/he would interview them in Turkish, each of them showed the same reaction: they all gave a sigh of relief. Even this kind of behavior shows their reluctance and attitude towards speaking in English. Within the interview, the researcher asked them 15 questions regarding their confidence, attitudes, language abilities, teacher, etc. setting out from Littlewood's (2004), Dwyer & Heller-

Murphy's (1996), Tsui's (1996) and Lee & Ng's (2010) study outcomes. Participants are referred as Participant#1, Participant#2, Participant#3, Participant#4 and Participant#5 hereafter.

The first question was about the age at which they started learning English. Participant#4 was the one who started the earliest and s/he started learning English in kindergarden. Participant#3 was at 1st grade, Participant#5 was at 4th grade and Participant#1 and Participant#2 were at 6th grade when they started learning English. None of the participants had speaking courses during their previous English instruction except Participant#4 who had it only when s/he was at high school. All the participants agreed that the focus was always on grammar or on vocabulary rather than speaking during their English instruction. Another question required them to evaluate their own English proficiency skills. The results show that participants' reluctance does not seem to be related to their lack of knowledge of vocabulary or grammar and they think they don't have any problems with their proficiency in English. Two of the participants (Participant#2 and Participant#3) stated that they had no problem with none of their language skills, especially with speaking while other three participants had different views. Only Participant#1 told s/he lacks vocabulary and that is why s/he cannot exactly express herself in English which causes her/his reluctance. Participant#4 stated s/he had a soul of perfectionism and while s/he is trying to speak in English properly, s/he gets stuck. S/he does not want to make mistakes. While Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996) found that one of the causes is low English proficiency, these pieces of information show the opposite. Even though they have been learning English for a long time and they are advanced-level students, they have different problems in speaking in English.

During the interview, the participants were also asked whether they were afraid of making mistakes or not while speaking in English and they clearly stated they did not want to make mistakes. For example, Participant#4 said s/he was afraid of making mistakes since s/he continually thinks of grammar while speaking in English. These results also show that the participants lack confidence in speaking in English. This is in the same direction with the outcome of Dwyer and Heller-Murphy's (1996) study. They also found out that one of the reasons of reluctance is due to fear of making mistakes. However, participants are interestingly afraid of making mistakes when they speak to Turkish speakers, not to native speakers of English and they are probably afraid of being despised. This result is similar to what Li and Lui (2011) put forward: one of the causes may be cultural differences and similarly Turkish culture seems to discourage students. Moreover, Participant#3 stated s/he finds herself/himself thinking about what they would think of her/him if s/he made a mistake while speaking to Turkish speakers of English. On the other hand, s/he is more comfortable with speaking to native speakers and s/he speaks English fluently. All the participants told the researcher the same thing. When the researcher asked the reason of this behavior, Participant#4 explained it as follows:

*"There is a prejudice among Turkish speakers of English. I judge people when they make mistakes while speaking in English. Because of this, I put myself in their shoes and I don't feel comfortable while speaking in English. I am afraid of making mistakes. However, it is easier to talk to native speakers; for instance, to Americans. They don't pay attention to your grammar mistakes as Turkish people do. Native speakers are more sincere to you. They nod and show that they can understand you. They motivate you by doing so."*

Curiously enough, the participants show that they are more comfortable with speaking to natives rather than non-natives. There is also the role of the teacher which might have an effect on students' reluctance. The teachers' being native or non-native could play a role on students' will. The results show when the teacher does not speak in their mother tongue they feel obligatory to speak in English as much as possible which raises the rate of participation, regardless of the teacher's being native or non-native. Questions 4 and 5 focused on the differences among their native&non-native teachers, which could have an effect on their desire of participation since in the previous term they had a native speaker teacher and during the term in which the study was conducted they had a non-native teacher giving the oral communication course. They all stated there is not any significant difference among their two teachers since the Turkish one keeps speaking in English all the time. However, Participant#3 indicated that non-native teachers could be helpful in terms of making clear the unperceived points while all the participants added that native speakers, in comparison, build up passion for speaking when compared to non-native ones. For instance, Participant#1 stated s/he had more desire to speak in English trying to speak like her/his native teacher.

In addition to teachers' being native or non-native, the participants were asked whether teacher correction could have an effect on their reluctance. All the participants stated that this does not affect their will of speaking except

Participant#5. S/he told that if the teacher corrects her/him once, s/he tries to pay more attention to her/his speaking which causes her/him to make more mistakes of which s/he is afraid.

Another important point about the reluctance problem among EFL students is the topic of interest. If the talking point is an attention getting and an interest-appropriate one, the students want to speak and participate more in the discussion which resolves reluctance. One of the participants stated if s/he doesn't have enough knowledge on a subject, s/he can't get deep into it and s/he is not able say much. If something is of her/his point of interest and if s/he knows much about it, s/he wants to speak more. This point of view is important in terms of reviewing the talking points engaged in the oral communication courses.

All in all, there are many factors affecting student participation in oral communication courses, which is one of the biggest problems in EFL classrooms.

#### 4. Conclusion

The starting point of this study was to shed light on one of the problems in the EFL classrooms: reluctance to speak in L2. The general picture in these classrooms is students do not adopt active speech roles in EFL classrooms, which then turns out to be a real problem as those learners hardly ever volunteer to respond to questions, and rarely carry out a conversation in L2 with their peers and the teacher. Accordingly, this action research was carried out in one of these problematic classrooms. However, the outcome of the study was astounding since the questionnaire analysis show that the participants do not seem to be reluctant to speak in English although the interview sessions showed the opposite. Even though the findings taken from questionnaire results were not statistically significant, the interview results were consistent with their attitude observed in-class time. One explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the possible effect that the participants filled out the questionnaire carelessly.

Data collected from interview sessions revealed that the students are reluctant to speak in English and in line with previous research findings the reasons are lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, cultural factors, and teacher effect.

Finally, although the results show the presence of reluctance in speaking classes, they cannot be explained only through this small number of participants. In addition, Donald (2010) suggests that the causes of reticence and reluctance among learners of English as a second or foreign language cannot be generalized or simplified as being applicable to all learners because all the students are different from each other. Future studies may wish to examine other possible reasons of reluctance and provide useful strategies to engage EFL students to participate more in English oral communication classes. There is, nonetheless, a need for further research in this subject, involving more participants.

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